



Identifying the Decisive Point

CAPTAIN DENNIS R. LINTON

At what time and place on the battlefield will the next battle be won or lost? This is a question that commanders have long tried to answer. Every battle has a *decisive point* that can be determined through hindsight. Throughout history, however, successful commanders have been able to determine this point during the planning phase of an operation, concentrate combat power at the critical time and place, and go on to achieve victory. One example can be seen in General Robert E. Lee's conduct of the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863.

The Army of Northern Virginia had stopped the Union attack at Fredericksburg, but Lee received reconnaissance reports that the enemy was massing for an attack on his left flank. Leaving his right flank lightly defended, Lee reinforced his forces at Chancellorsville. He decided to conduct a spoiling attack and searched for a Union weakness. Through reconnaissance, he determined that the Union right flank was weak and unprotected and ordered General Stonewall Jackson to conduct a night attack through the area of tangled underbrush known as the Wilderness. This attack so shocked and confused the Union forces that they abandoned their attack and were decisively defeated. Lee's ability to visualize the battlefield, exploit an enemy

weakness, and concentrate combat power at the decisive point led to his success.

In the 19th century, this ability to identify the decisive point was defined by the French phrase *coup d'oeil*—literally, “stroke of the eye.” A 1914 military dictionary defined the term as *the art of distinguishing by a rapid glance the weak points of an enemy's position, and of discerning the advantages and disadvantages offered by any given space or [terrain], or selecting with judgment the most advantageous position for a camp or battlefield.*

DEVELOP ABILITY

Some of the great battle captains of the past, such as Lee, may have been able to determine the decisive point intuitively, but most leaders have to be trained in this skill. Today's commanders, if they are to develop their own power of *coup d'oeil*, must learn to identify a potentially decisive point (or recognize such a moment when it occurs on the battlefield); synchronize combat power at that point; and then reinforce this ability through tactical training. First, however, the Army needs to offer a more adequate definition of *decisive point*.

Military theorist Henri Jomini, in *The*

Art of War (1838), first attempted to define the term in the levels of war that are now recognized as operational and tactical. He said that any action or position that is capable of exercising a marked influence—upon the result of the campaign or of a single battle—is a decisive point. As this definition relates to the tactical level, the decisive point on the battlefield is determined by the terrain, the positions the respective forces occupy, and the point's relationship to the ultimate aim of the operation.

Although this definition is not completely satisfactory today, it comes close. For purposes of this discussion, therefore, *decisive point* is defined as the point in a given campaign, battle, or engagement at which one force achieves success, and the tide of battle shifts from one side to the other. This point is determined by the terrain, the enemy disposition, or an event, in combination with time. The point will be decisive only if it achieves the purpose of the respective force.

Examples of possible decisive points are the seizure of terrain that controls an avenue of approach, the exploitation of an open flank, or the destruction of a critical unit, weapon, or other asset (such as a command post or a logistical base) that is important to the enemy.

The planning tools a commander uses

are the estimate of the situation, the intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB), and the analysis of relative combat power.

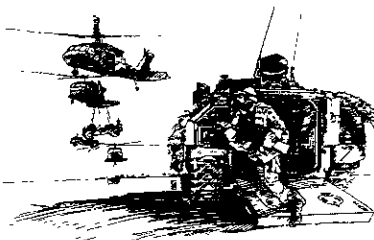
As a leader goes through the estimate of the situation, he begins to identify possible decisive points. During the mission analysis, he identifies the essential tasks that must be done if the unit is to accomplish its mission. The leader should understand how the purpose of his mission relates to the main effort, and how his unit fits into his higher commander's intent and concept of the operation. During the terrain analysis, the leader should determine whether the terrain offers a marked advantage to any combatant who controls it. The enemy analysis will help the leader understand the disposition and the capabilities of the opposing force so he can determine its possible weaknesses. The analysis of friendly troops should be done in the same manner. This information provides criteria that can be used in comparing strengths and weaknesses in terms of relative combat power.

Most of the information about the enemy and the terrain is obtained during the IPB process. The advantage of this process is that it gives the commander a graphic picture of the upcoming battlefield. These products help focus reconnaissance efforts on probable enemy weaknesses and possible decisive points. Such IPB products as the decision support template help the commander make decisions in a timely manner so as to strike a decisive blow. But the IPB works this way only if the commander keeps in mind two things: It is a process that continues throughout the battle, and, most important, it is everyone's responsibility, not just the S-2's.

Before developing courses of action, the commander must complete his analysis of relative combat power. Since the goal is to concentrate combat power against enemy weaknesses, he must evaluate his own unit's strengths and weaknesses in comparison to the enemy's. Although force ratios can provide a starting place for his analysis, this information does not fully take into account such combat multipliers as

deception and other intangible factors.

The next step is an analysis of friendly strengths against enemy weaknesses, and vice versa, using the elements of combat power (maneuver, firepower, protection, leadership) as comparison criteria. This analysis helps identify points where a friendly strength may be able to exploit an enemy weakness, as well as points where the commander must protect his own weaknesses. In addition, it helps the commander identify tactics, techniques, or procedures that he might use either to amplify his own combat power or to degrade that of the enemy. For a light force fighting a heavy force, one example is an antiarmor ambush in restrictive terrain. After completing the analysis in this manner, the commander can identify points where he may be able to concentrate overwhelming combat power on an enemy weakness. If he decides that one of these points will achieve the purpose



of the mission, then it is a potential decisive point.

Upon completion of the estimate of the situation and the analysis of relative combat power, the commander—using the IPB products—can then identify potential decisive points and develop the following courses of actions as outlined in the current editions of Field Manuals 7-10, *The Infantry Rifle Company*, and 7-20, *The Infantry Battalion*:

- Determine the decisive points and times on which to focus combat power.
- Determine the results that must be achieved at the decisive points to accomplish the mission.
- Determine the results to be accomplished by the main effort and the supporting efforts. The purpose of the main effort should be clearly linked to

the decisive point, and the purposes of the supporting efforts should be linked to the main effort.

- Determine the essential tasks for subordinate units (main and supporting efforts) that achieve these purposes.

- Task organize and establish control measures that clarify and support the mission.

(Although FMs 7-10 and 7-20 are primarily for light infantry units, the process is the same for other units as well.)

Everyone involved should keep in mind that any potential decisive point identified during the planning phase is only that—potential. Since combat does not always unfold as the commander has envisioned or planned it, however, the commander must also make sure his plan is flexible enough to allow for the accomplishment of the mission if the decisive point should occur at another time or place during the battle.

He must train his subordinate leaders to use the products that come from the planning process to help them visualize the upcoming battle. Frequent tactical decision exercises can be used to train these leaders to visualize the battlefield, attack enemy weaknesses, and concentrate combat power to achieve a decision.

In addition, he must also allow his subordinate leaders the flexibility to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. One way to do this is to issue mission orders, which focus on the tasks that must be accomplished without specifying how they are to be done. Mission orders work, however, only if the subordinates understand the commander's intent and concept of the operation. The commander's intent must be tied in with the commander's intent at each higher level. This relationship between the units at various levels allows his subordinates to adapt to changing circumstances and still accomplish the mission.

An example of identifying the decisive point when it appears on the battlefield can be seen in the battle at Chickamauga in 1863. During the second day of the battle, a miscommunication in orders caused a gap to develop in

the Union line as one unit shifted positions before it was relieved. At the same moment, the lead brigade of General James Longstreet's corps charged. Acting on the brigade's success, Longstreet seized the moment and squeezed his entire corps through this half-mile gap, routing General William Rosecrans and half of his army. This defeat forced the Union troops to retreat to Chattanooga. By taking advantage of an enemy weakness that developed at a critical time, Longstreet was able to bring the Confederate Army one of its few victories in the western theater.

The estimate of the situation, the IPB, mission orders, and commander's intent are practiced every day in our army. But we need to reinforce the process of tying them in with achieving the decisive point. We must train our leaders so they can use these concepts to develop their ability to recognize the decisive point and reinforce it in tactical training.

Once leaders have learned the importance of concentrating combat power against enemy weaknesses, and particularly when they recognize the importance of directing the main effort at a decisive point, they will naturally want to be able to perceive these decisive points at a glance. We can train them to concentrate combat power at the deci-

sive point by using such training events as map and sand table exercises, including wargaming, and by discussing the decisive point during after-action reviews (AARs) following tactical exercises.

Map exercises enable leaders to plan potential decisive points and to discuss their reasons for selecting those points. Wargaming shows whether a planned point will be decisive and whether the plan provides the flexibility needed to take advantage of a decisive point that occurs elsewhere. These low-cost exercises are effective for officer professional development sessions.

After-action reviews also provide an excellent opportunity to discuss the decisive point. The following questions can be useful during an AAR to help teach the importance of recognizing and acting upon the decisive point:

- Was a potential decisive point identified during the planning process?
- Was the main effort focused to attain decisive action at the decisive point? Did supporting efforts tie in with the actions of the main effort?
- Where did the commander concentrate his combat power? Was this a potential decisive point?
- What was the outcome? Did the point turn out to be decisive or not?
- At what actual time and place did

the battle shift in favor of one force?

- Did the plan have the flexibility needed to shift the focus of effort if the decisive point was somewhere other than planned?

Only with training can leaders learn to identify potential decisive points during the planning process. Then they must develop the ability to recognize the decisive point when it occurs during combat. If the decisive point is not where it has been planned, leaders must have the flexibility to shift the focus of effort to achieve a decisive victory there.

The proper exercise of the formal planning process during training will help our leaders identify possible decisive points. It is only with training that today's leaders will develop the skills of the great captains of the past in recognizing decisive points and seizing the opportunity for victory.

Captain Dennis R. Linton is a small-group tactics instructor in the Infantry Officer Advanced Course. He previously served in platoon and company assignments and commanded a rifle company in the 25th Infantry Division. He is a 1984 ROTC graduate of the West Virginia Institute of Technology and has completed the U.S. Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School.

The Army's Family of Boots

CAPTAIN TROY W. GARRETT

Protecting soldiers' feet has always been a major challenge to an army. Whether it was the earliest Roman legion traversing the rugged Alps or a battalion of U.S. infantrymen slogging through the muddy rice paddies of Vietnam, their commanders understood

that despite technology, the objective must ultimately be taken by the foot soldier. If soldiers are not trained and equipped to care for their feet, victory in battle is difficult, if not impossible. Foot injuries accounted for a high percentage of casualties in the Buna and

Aleutians campaigns of World War II, on the Russian front, and later during the Korean War.

Our modern Army still faces the challenge of protecting its soldiers' feet, a challenge that is more complex than ever. Today, with the U.S. Army's